

**Sermon Series:** Draw Near

**Sermon Title:** Serious Discipline

**Sermon Text:** Matthew 6:16-18

**Supporting Texts:** Philippians 3:18-19, 2 Tim 3:4-5, Matthew 4:1-2, Dan 9:3-5, Hebrews 11:6, Psalm 61:1-5, Matthew 7:7-8, Isaiah 58:6-11, Matthew 4:4, Matthew 6:31-33.

**Sermon Summary:** Today's message deals with the spiritual discipline of fasting. It is one of the least understood and least practiced of all the spiritual disciplines. Our culture does not lend itself to the practice of this discipline. The concept of fasting is explored first, followed by the motives behind fasting and then the benefits of fasting. Here are some questions to ponder: Have you ever explored the discipline of fasting? If so, what was your experience like? What do you think is the primary purpose of fasting? Matthew 6:31-33  
Why should fasting primarily be a private rather than a public activity? 1 Peter 5:5-6  
What benefits can be gained from fasting? Isaiah 58:6-11

**Full Sermon Notes:**

"Cause when You speak, When You move, When You do what only You can do, It changes us, it changes what we see and what we seek." I love those lyrics because they're so true! When God speaks, I want to hear what He is saying, because I know it's important, it's needed, it's life-changing! We're going to talk about a spiritual discipline today that can put us in a position to better hear the voice of God! And when it comes to spiritual disciplines, this one takes some serious discipline! So let's pray and ask God to open our hearts and minds to the practice of this very special spiritual discipline. Pray!

How many of you in this room go to the gym at least sometimes or have some type of workout routine you follow at home? Okay, what I'm about to tell you may encourage and inspire some of our workout people, or it may just destroy you! WLNS radio station in Royal Oak, Mich. shared this amazing story just this past week – Nora Langdon — a 78-year old woman who lives in Royal Oak, currently holds 19 world records and is now working on number 20 in weightlifting. Unlike most people her age, Langdon is continuing to push the boundaries for weightlifting. She can deadlift 400 pounds, squat 380 and bench presses up to 185."

All I've got to say is that is some serious physical discipline right there!

Dallas Willard wrote in his book Celebration of Disciplines...

"Spiritual disciplines are exercises unto godliness. If I train rigorously I can bench press 300 pounds, otherwise not. Such ordinary activities are actually disciplines that aid our physical or 'natural' life. The same thing happens with disciplines for our spiritual life. When through spiritual disciplines I become able heartily to bless those who curse me, pray without ceasing, to be at peace when not given credit for good deeds I've done, or to master the evil that comes my way, it is because my disciplinary activities have inwardly poised me for more and more interaction with the powers of the living God and His Kingdom. Such is the potential we tap into when we use the disciplines."

The discipline we will discuss today is one that requires serious discipline. In other words, if you're not extremely serious about your spiritual growth, you will not exercise this discipline. Today's discipline is one of the least understood and least practiced of all the spiritual disciplines. Our culture does not lend itself to the practice of today's discipline. In fact there was a period of 100 years where not a single book was written on the subject. The discipline of which I speak is...

### ***Fasting - Abstaining from food!***

There are three kinds of fasting...

Normal fast - no food

Absolute fast - no food or water (3 day max)

Partial fast - Restriction of diet (The Daniel Fast)

Some should only do the restriction of diet because of health issues. Those with diabetes or those with heart or other severe health issues should talk to their Doctor before fasting. But none of us are off the hook. Your fast may be eating just what you need to keep your blood sugar right, and giving up that "no sugar dessert" so you can spend some extra time praying and meditating on God's Word! And for growing kids, maybe you give up snack time, or eat only veggies, or drink water instead of Soda. Which, by the way, has some pretty good health benefits! Fasting is not commanded by Jesus, but is assumed by Jesus. He didn't say, "Thou shalt fast!" He did say, "When you fast!" He also omitted instruction on how often. Ask God to reveal to your heart how often and how long. Take small steps at first.

Because fasting involves giving up food for a certain period of time, most people focus on the giving up part! Fasting in the Bible is always about taking a break from food. However, the concept of fasting does have broader application. Fasting is about taking a break from certain things but it's not just about what you give up, it's about what you gain! Abstaining from food for a given time disciplines us to acknowledge our dependence upon God for our physical needs. It allows us to be thankful for what we've been given. It helps us appreciate the gift of food and to understand hunger is not a totally negative thing. If we never got hungry we would not know the joy of eating a good meal. Hunger is only bad when it is never allowed to be satisfied and when some have plenty and others want for the basic nutrition needed for life to be sustained.

When a person fasts, it helps them realize just how blessed they are and hopefully gives them a greater desire to help those who have so much less. So the basic definition of fasting is abstaining from food! It is taking a break from preparing and eating a meal to focus on what matters the most in life! Food is necessary to live, so we have to eat to live, but some folks live to eat, and that's a problem with priorities in life. Fasting helps us with that! But, as I said, fasting is one of the least understood and least practiced of all spiritual disciplines. Why? Because, as I said, people automatically think of it as giving up something rather than gaining something. We'll talk about what we gain, the benefits of fasting, in a minute, but another reason fasting is rarely practiced is because our culture does not lend itself to the practice of this spiritual discipline.

Our culture is one of gluttonous consumption. All you can eat, and bigger is better, and having more is the ultimate goal! Uncontrolled consumption fuels our economy, but also fuels our spiritual destruction. And once again, it's not just about food. Our culture pushes unlimited pursuit of success at any cost, sexual satisfaction without moral constraints, and unabated materialism. It's the attitude, "I want that, and I want it now, but I'll settle for free second day shipping!" And thinking back to Christmas, is it really already the middle of March? Black Friday and Cyber Monday have turned into Cyber week, and the twelve days of Christmas have turned into a month of Black Fridays! And then every single holiday we have throughout the year has an associated sales event. I'm not against shopping or sales events, or eating at a buffet, but if we're not careful, our need to consume will consume us! This is not a new struggle. Paul described what was going on in Biblical times, but seems to have described some aspects of our culture pretty accurately today...

For, as I have often told you before and now say again even with tears, many live as enemies of the cross of Christ. Philippians 3:18 (NIV)  
Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is on earthly things. Philippians 3:19 (NIV)

You've heard me say it many times before, "It's not wrong to own things, but it's tragic when things own you!"

I hope today you will begin to understand, fasting is not something to be dreaded, but something to be embraced and has amazing benefits. Jesus taught that fasting is a spiritual activity between an individual and God. Fasting is a very beneficial discipline for spiritual health and it is my prayer you will begin to exercise the spiritual discipline of fasting. But you may rightfully ask, "why is fasting so important to my spiritual health? Good question and in order to answer your question let's look at two important elements of the discipline of fasting which come from our text in Matthew 6:16-18. Jesus said...

Matthew 6:16 "When you fast, do not look sombre as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show men they are fasting. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full.  
Matthew 6:17 But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face,  
Matthew 6:18 so that it will not be obvious to men that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

So what is the first element of fasting we should understand?

### **Element #1 MOTIVES**

Mat 6:16 "When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show men they are fasting. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full.

There are at least three motives or purposes for fasting:

For physical purposes (dieting, giving your digestive system a break)  
For political purposes (hunger strike)  
For spiritual purposes (seeking God)

Obviously we're focusing on the third one. But before we do, we've got to talk about a fourth motive altogether which Jesus spoke of. Those fasting...

#### *For the Appearance of Spirituality (Seeking Self)*

If you fast for selfish motives then the only benefit you will receive is the perceived goodness others will see in you. The gift God intended for you to find in fasting will be lost! Those wanting to have an appearance of spirituality have fallen victim to pride! This flies in the face of what should be the motive. Instead of seeking God they are seeking self-aggrandizement which means:

Aggrandizement - to enhance the reputation of (someone) beyond what is justified by the facts It is the opposite of all that spiritual discipline stands for.

These are the kind of folks Paul spoke of in 2 Timothy...

2 Tim 3:4 treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God--  
2 Tim 3:5 having a form of godliness but denying its power. Have nothing to do with them.

All of the things Paul mentioned are the very things fasting is designed to fight against. The reason fasting fights against these things is that it causes us to fight our dependence on self, and helps us to teach self not to become selfish! Self has to be disciplined! Self had to be taught how desperately it needs God, how much it depends on God, and how without God, self becomes self destructive! So a good motivation for fasting is to discipline self and not let it become self-seeking! With that in mind we turn to the greatest motive for fasting which is...

#### *For Spiritual Purposes (Seeking God)*

One thing is for certain: Jesus felt those who truly seek God would from time to time take extraordinary steps to hear from the Almighty by practicing the spiritual disciplines, like fasting! Jesus practiced what He preached!.

Mat 4:1 Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil.

Mat 4:2 After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry.

You might want to practice a bit before you go for a 40 day fast! But Jesus obviously felt it extremely important to fast at the beginning of His earthly ministry! Foster asks a very convicting question when speaking of the discipline of fasting.

“Where are the people today who will respond to the call of Christ? Have we become so accustomed to “cheap grace” that we instinctively shy away from more demanding calls to obedience?”

What is cheap grace? Dietrich Bonhoeffer described cheap grace in his book *The Cost of Discipleship*...

“Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross.”

Remember grace wasn't cheap for God. It cost Him His Son's life on a Cross! Listen to this:

“When we refuse to exercise spiritual discipline we treat God's grace cheaply. When we realize the extreme cost Jesus paid for us to have God's grace we develop an insatiable desire to love God deeply, know God intimately, and live in God's will every moment of our lives! This becomes our main motive for pursuing the spiritual disciplines!” Itm

Fasting is one of the ways we train our spirit, mind and body to keep that “God desire” priority!! Sometimes fasting is combined with confession, a discipline we will discuss later in this series. Foster says...

“Our motive in fasting must always be that we can experience fasting as the gift of God it truly is! That may mean we couple fasting with a time of confession.”

The reason for this combination is that when we are seeking God we must first realize that sin destroys the intimacy between us and God. Fasting is wasted effort if we are harboring unconfessed sin in our life. And we must remember, the primary motivation for fasting should be our desire to seek the Lord! Giving up food but holding on to our wickedness, our selfishness, and our idols, defeats the purpose for fasting in the first place!

An example of this combination of confession and fasting is the prayer Daniel prayed towards the end of the Babylonian captivity...

Dan 9:3 So I turned to the Lord God and pleaded with him in prayer and petition, in fasting, and in sackcloth and ashes.

Dan 9:4 I prayed to the LORD my God and confessed: "O Lord, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love with all who love him and obey his commands,

Dan 9:5 we have sinned and done wrong. We have been wicked and have rebelled; we have turned away from your commands and laws.

The reason for this combination is that when we are seeking God we must first realize that sin destroys the intimacy between us and God. Fasting is wasted effort if we are harboring unconfessed sin in our life. So we must remember, the primary motivation for fasting should be our desire to seek the Lord and discipline self! Bottom line:

Fasting is more about flourishing spiritually rather than flaunting our spirituality!!

So motives are of critical importance when it comes to fasting, but there is another element to fasting we must not miss.

## **Element #2 BENEFITS**

Mat 6:17 But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face,

Mat 6:18 so that it will not be obvious to men that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

The writer of Hebrews put it this way...

Heb 11:6 ...he rewards those who earnestly seek him.

In other words, when you fast for the right reasons there will be great rewards and you won't be down and out while you're fasting, but rather excited about the gifts God is giving to you through the exercise of fasting! What are some of those benefits and rewards? Let me just mention first that there really are...

### *Physical Benefits*

It is not true that fasting is unhealthy. as long as it is done correctly it can actually improve your physical well being! Most of us never give our digestive system a break! Most of us could stand to use up some of our reserves. All of us need to discipline our bodies to "Just say No!" Listen to this observation from a study on fasting by Frederica Mathewes Green...

"The gluttonous impulse is a sign of disharmony with God's provision and creation, and it can disrupt the spiritual lives of people of every size....Previous generations of Christians knew this... Overindulgence in food did not just lead to thickened waistlines and arteries; it led to spiritual disaster."

So one of the benefits of fasting, is physical. But the spiritual benefits are off the charts!

### *Spiritual Benefits*

Believe it or not, one of the spiritual benefits of fasting is...

### Freedom!

And you might be thinking, "You've got to be kidding!" You might be surprised at how our physical impulses hold sway over us. The choices we make, the things we do. Spiritually speaking we must learn to control these things. Richard Foster puts it this way...

“More than any other single discipline, fasting reveals the things that control us. This is a wonderful benefit to the true disciple who longs to be transformed into the image of Jesus Christ. Fasting helps us keep our balance in life. How easily we begin to allow nonessentials to take precedence in our lives. How quickly we crave things we do not need until we are enslaved by them.”

But spiritual disciplines and the spiritual discipline of fasting specifically are not only about what it rescues you from, but about who it brings you to!

### Getting to Know God Personally

If you just said, “Well, I’d rather eat,” then you have never experienced the excitement and deep sense of fulfillment that comes from spending time with God! We need to get to a place where we are as excited about spending time with God as we are about going to Copelands. You might say, “but Pastor Larry have you had the crawfish bread?” Yes and it’s the best thing on the menu! And some people would say I’m crazy to think spending time with God would be better than a trip to Copelands. Well, I’m in good company...Listen to what the Psalmist said...

Psalm 63:1 O God, you are my God, earnestly I seek you; my soul thirsts for you, my body longs for you, in a dry and weary land where there is no water.

Psalm 63:2 I have seen you in the sanctuary and beheld your power and your glory.

Psalm 63:3 Because your love is better than life, my lips will glorify you.

Psalm 63:4 I will praise you as long as I live, and in your name I will lift up my hands.

Psalm 63:5 My soul will be satisfied as with the richest of foods; with singing lips my mouth will praise you.

What do you seek? What do you thirst for? What do you long for? Maybe we don’t have the same passion for God as the Psalmist because we have not taken the time to see Him in his sanctuary and beheld His power and glory! Fasting is a gift from God that can help us see Him for who He is and come to understand that His love is better than life! Practicing the spiritual disciplines has benefits the world simply cannot give you! Not even Copeland’s Cheesecake Factory!

In the coming three weeks you will discover how fasting helps...

### Focus your prayers!

Fasting gives us time to focus on the contents and the concepts of prayer, which Zach spoke so beautifully on last week and brings great spiritual insights! Why is this so? Because when a person has made the decision to give up something so important and pleasurable as eating for the purpose of pursuing God, God will reward them! In fact Zach reminded us last week of these words of Jesus...

Mat 7:7 "Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you.

Mat 7:8 For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened.

A true fast will transform us from self-centered, and self-absorbed to a man or woman who seeks God and who seeks for God's will to be done in this world! You will in fact discover one of the greatest blessings and benefits of spiritual discipline. You will become a...

### World Changer

Listen to God's Word in Isaiah...

Isa 58:6 "Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke?"

Isa 58:7 Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter-- when you see the naked, to clothe him, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?

Isa 58:8 Then your light will break forth like the dawn, and your healing will quickly appear; then your righteousness will go before you, and the glory of the LORD will be your rear guard.

Isa 58:9 Then you will call, and the LORD will answer; you will cry for help, and he will say: Here am I. "If you do away with the yoke of oppression, with the pointing finger and malicious talk,

Isa 58:10 and if you spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed, then your light will rise in the darkness, and your night will become like the noonday.

Isa 58:11 The LORD will guide you always; he will satisfy your needs in a sun-scorched land and will strengthen your frame. You will be like a well-watered garden, like a spring whose waters never fail.

The concept of fasting is a gift from God that will transform you from self-centered, and self-absorbed, to a man or woman who seeks God and who seeks God's will to be done in their life and in this world! And that's one of the most practical benefits of God's gift of fasting to us, we become a difference maker in a world of hurts!! So how exactly can fasting help me become a world changer? It has to do with...

### Time and Resources

The time you would have spent purchasing, preparing and eating can be spent seeking God. Also, the resources you save could be used to aid Kingdom causes. Now here's where it gets extremely practical! You might take the resources you would have spent on yourself for a meal and save that up to spend on causes for God's Kingdom. I know someone who had a good job and decided to take their extra income for two years and spend it building a home for someone in a third world country. Can you imagine the bond those people now have? And here's a cool thing. We are encouraging you to fast for the next three Fridays for just lunch or for breakfast and lunch. We have a handout for you today that will guide you in your purpose and prayers for each fast. On Good Friday, April 2nd, we encourage you to break your fast with dinner, and then join us for a church family worship gathering at 7:00pm here at the church building. In addition

we challenge you to save the money you would have spent on the meals and bring it to the worship gathering as an offering to support the building of a house for a family in Baja, Mexico. We will worship with prayer, song and the Lord's Supper that night! But of course, you don't have to wait for Good Friday, to experience the benefits of fasting! The benefits will start the first time you fast and spend that time with God! I'll leave you with two things Jesus said. First, when He was fasting in the desert and was being tempted by Satan to turn the stones into bread...

Matthew 4:4 Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"

And in the same teaching moment we found our text today, a few verses later Jesus said this...

Matthew 6:31 So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?'

Matthew 6:32 For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them.

Matthew 6:33 But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

Fasting is a great way to do just that!

Let's pray!